Issues with Romance in the Workplace Environment

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Abstract

Due to the increased interaction between coworkers on a daily basis, studies show there is a direct correlation with romance that stems from the workplace. While there can be benefits, this paper will show how romances in the workplace can result in negative effects on the workplace environments through a multitude of ways. Workplace Romances deal with issues originating from hierarchal relationships, including sexual harassment and favouritism, which further impacts job productivity and morale. The existence of these forms of relationships may be unavoidable, yet they can also be damaging to a company when relationships become unsuccessful. Workplace Romances can have a major effect on coworkers, including tension and conflict. Workplace policies are a divided subject, as they could perhaps prevent issues, while at the same time, they may create further issues.

Introduction

Workplace Romances (WR) deal with many issues such as sexuality, gender, power, justice and injustice, and have possible consequences of sexual harassment, conflict of interest and favouritism (Chory & Hoke, 2019, p. 575). WR's is defined as "a non-platonic relationship between two members of an organization in which sexual attraction is present, affection is communicated, and both members recognize the relationship to be something more than just professional and platonic" (Horan & Chory, 2011, as cited in Chory & Hoke, 2019, p. 578). According to Hymowitz and Pollock (1998, as cited in Foley & Powell, 1999), WR's have been occurring more frequently in recent years and they often have an impact on how participants conduct themselves within their workplace environment (p. 1043). Literature on this topic can sometimes be divided between showing the positive aspects of WR and showing the negative influences that these relationships can have on the organization (Balaban, 2019, p. 133).

Additionally, WR's tend to influence the work environment of coworkers, resulting in many outcomes, such as, if they see the relationship as unjust, they will expect management to intervene (Society for Human Resource Management, 1998, as cited in Foley & Powell, 1999, p.

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1044). The issue for management of WR's has been noted to be dealt with on a case-by-case basis, as WR's are inevitable and how it is handled depends on a multitude of factors which will be discussed in greater depth further on (Foley & Powell, 1999, p. 1045). As noted by Foley and Powell (1999), WR's in most cases were "characterized by negative work group outcomes such as high levels of gossip, complaints, hostilities, distorted communications, lower morale, and lower productivity" (p. 1047). Thus, allowing researchers and readers a glimpse into understanding how romance within the workplace often creates issues throughout the workplace environment. Furthermore, Anderson and Hunsaker (1985, as cited in Alder & Quist, 2014) explore how multiple previous studies have indicated that WR may lead to lower participant job performance and increased deviant behaviour (p. 330). In addition, Hierarchal Workplace Romances (HWR) which refers to a superior-subordinate relationship are typically perceived as more negative among employees for many reasons including that of jealousy, favouritism in regard to pay, promotions, leniency and could perhaps result in issues of sexual harassment (Dillard et al., 1994; Mainiero, 1986, as cited in Pierce et al., 2000, p. 870). According to Mainiero (1989, as cited in Balaban, 2019), if Workplace Romances break off, they could result in conflicts of interest, biased decision-making, and further inequities that would negatively impact the job performance of those involved and even coworkers (p.128).

Job Productivity

Balaban (2019) explains how a companies' first concern and their reasons to consider banning organizational romance is solely based on job productivity (p. 129). Pierce at al., (1996, as cited in Balaban) discuss job performance and suggest that newly formed couples are initially less productive due to investment of energy and time they put into their relationship (p. 129). Consistent with this research, Mainiero (1989, as cited in Balaban) conveys that in the early stages of workplace romance is when productivity may decline (p. 129). Furthermore, additional research acknowledges that some couples may become more productive, however, it is still more common to see a decline due to missing meetings, late arrivals and early departures, and costly errors (Pierce et al., 1996, as cited in Balaban, 2019, p. 129). Karl and Sutton (2000, as cited in Cole, 2009) noted that strong disciplinary action when it comes to WR's is perceived as fair if the work performances of the couples declines or if the romance is highly visible (p. 365). However, this could create legal issues, thus further demonstrating how WR's can create complications in the workplace environment.

Cole (2009) explains how the results in her research indicated that there was a significant effect for the impact of the WR on the performance of the male party, but not the female party (p. 368). Cole (2009) also notes that none of the 100 participants in her study reported any positive effect of the WR on the performance of coworkers or the environment (p. 370). Cole (2009) proceeds by explaining, "but when there was an impact, it was invariably negative (p. 370). Thus, conveying that while WR's can be neutral and have little impact on the workplace setting, if there is an impact it is consistently negative in regard to job performance. In addition, Van Steenbergen et al., (2014, as cited in Chory & Hoke, 2019) points out how "love has been empirically linked to cognitive interference effects and reduced cognitive control", thus making it difficult to concentrate on work resulting in negative impacts on job productivity (p. 580).

Hierarchal Relationships

Chan-Serafin et al., (2017) indicate that according to a CareerBuilder (2013) U.S survey it found that 29 percent of respondents have been in a romantic relationship with an individual who is higher up in the organization (p. 309). Pierce et al., (1996, as cited in Chan-Serafin et al., 2017) explain that research on HWR is found to have the most potential to cause organizational disruptions in the workplace setting (p. 310). Thus, resulting in more conflict between coworkers and consequently, gossiping and loss of trust become an issue in the workplace environment (Cowan & Horan, 2014, as cited in Chan-Serafin, 2017, p. 310).

Moreover, Brown and Rice (1995, as cited in Balaban, 2019) explain how when coworkers are of different organizational status it creates a multitude of problems as it "leads to a potential power imbalance and if that exists then exploitation and work group dysfunction may also be present (p. 128). Mainiero (1989, as cited in Balaban, 2019) continues by explaining how hierarchal romances can be devastating and destructive due to coworkers' jealousy and suspicion of favouritism (p. 130). The potential threat of sexual harassment is also an issue that comes into play with HWR (Balaban, 2019, p. 130). Additionally, the lower status participant of the HWR is found to be treated more negatively by their peers (Horan & Chory, 2009; Malachowski et al., 2012, as cited in Chan-Serafin et al., 2017, p. 311). The lower status partner is described to be seen as "less loyal, hardworking, and successful than their higher status partners" (Devine & Markiewicz, 1990, as cited in Chan-Serafin et al., 2017, p. 314). Pierce at al., (1996, as cited in Chan-Serafin et al., 2017) enhanced this argument by proposing that in an HWR, lower status participants are likely to suffer detrimental consequences when the relationship is made public, such as termination (p. 314).

Favouritism

Cole and Mainiero (2009; 1986, as cited in Chan-Serafin et al., 2017) note that HWR create the possibility of workplace favouritism and injustice through the exchange of sexual resources for career benefits (p. 315). This can be exemplified through the district course case of *Doyle v. Advanced Fraud Sols, LLC* (2020), as the company's president who was in a relationship with his subordinate employee, was accused of providing her "favourable treatment… allowing [only] her to work from home… [and] providing her "inappropriate benefits", such as meals, and hotel rooms, at the company's expense" (Cavico & Mujtaba, 2021, p. 670). In another instance, the court case of *McKissic v. City of Reno* (2019), an assistant city manager was supposedly granted favourable assignment, and not held accountable for work related mistakes by the city manager who she was in a relationship with (Cavico & Mujtaba, 2021, p. 670).

Additionally, biased perceptions, such that of idealizing their WR partner as more competent, talented, and skilled over their organizational peers can result in perceptions of unfair advantages, which likely results in negative emotions being carried into the workplace environment (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986; Reis & Aron, 2008, as cited in Chory & Hoke, 2019, p. 580). Past research indicates that subordinate employees in HWR were viewed as "reaping work advantages to a greater extent than those in peer-peer relationships", thus emphasizing the issue of

favouritism and its impact on the workplace environment (Malachowski et al., 2012; Pierce et al., 1996, as cited in Chory & Hoke, 2019, p. 592). This is further highlighted by Pierce et al., (1996) and Powell (1993, as cited in Foley & Powell, 1999) as coworkers may believe that the subordinate in a HWR is receiving task and career rewards (p. 1048).

Sexual Harassment

Office romances may lead to sexual harassment when advances are unwelcomed, or when the relationship goes downhill and one participant retaliates with a sexual harassment claim (Hoffman et al., 1997, as cited in Balaban, 2019, p. 130). Research indicates that about 35-42 percent of women have experienced some form of sexual harassment in the workplace environment (Cavico & Mujtaba, 2021, p. 667). While 15 percent of male workers have claimed to have at least one experience of sexual harassment (Hoffman et al., 1997, as cited Balaban, 2019, p. 130). It is important to highlight that 48 percent of WR's dissolve, therefore this may open the door for sexually harassing behaviour between former relationships (Henry, 1995; Pierce & Aguinis, 1997, as cited in Pierce et al., 2000, p. 869). Pierce et al., (2000) theorize that a hostile work environment might wrongfully legitimize harassing behaviour, bringing into question the complainants romance motives (p. 877). Legally speaking, employees can sue an employer for allowing a hostile sexual environment to occur and failing to stop the harassment (Cavico & Mujtaba, 2021, p. 668).

Effects on Coworkers

Anderson and Hunsaker (1985, as cited in Foley & Powell, 1999) propose that WR's influence the work environment of coworkers as couples who work together are typically unsuccessful at hiding their romance (p. 1043). WR's are noted to substantially increase gossip among coworkers (Dillard & Miller, 1988; Quinn, 1977, as cited in Foley & Powell, 1999). According to Hoke and Chory (2015, as cited in Chory & Hoke, 2019), employees also deem WR's to instigate more workplace problems than friendships and professional relationships (p. 578). Foley and Powell (1999) describe how coworkers' responses to WR's vary from approval to tolerance to outright objection, which they direct at either the participants or management (p. 1047). Coworkers' responses to WR's are "influenced by their perceptions of the participants' motives, with the most negative responses reserved for utilitarian relationships", utilitarian relationships are defined as job motive for one participant, and ego for the other (Dillard et al., 1994; Dillard & Miller, 1988, as cited in Foley and Powell, 1999, p. 1048).

As expected, if coworkers believe that one participant has gained an unfair advantage in an HWR, they strongly object, thus resulting in conflict within the workplace setting (Foley & Powell, 1999, p. 1048). Additionally, research on WR's involving married individuals, or HWR generate negative coworker perceptions, resulting in destructive organizational outcomes due to anticipatory injustice (Alder & Quist, 2014, p. 332). That is, if employees expect to see injustice in their work settings, they are more likely to see it (Alder & Quist, 2014, p. 331). Shapiro and

Kirkman (2001; Shaw, 1997, as cited in Alder & Quist, 2014) add to this argument as coworkers' perception of unhealthy fear prompts loss of productivity, poor health, and employee turnover, thus creating issues in the workplace environment for all involved (p. 336).

Morale

WR's have been noted to increase morale in some instances, through motivation, encouraging creativity, and innovation; while on the other hand, HWR have been well-known to generate a negative effect on the morale of coworkers if preferential treatment comes into play (Pierce & Aguinis, 2005, as cited in Cole, 2009, p. 364). Further research concludes that manager-subordinate romances impact employee morale more than peer romances do (Pierce et al., 1996, as cited in Balaban, 2019, p. 130). Foley and Powell (1999) state "group morale and productivity are likely to suffer when coworkers fear that a conflict of interest resulting from a WR has led or will lead to being unjustly denied benefits" (p. 1047). Conversely, those with unfavourable attitudes towards WR will display negative work-related attitudes and behaviour, thus emphasizing how morale with WR's can result in harmful issues for the workplace environment (Foley & Powell, 1999, p. 1053). Additionally, managers who fail to intervene when a conflict of interest is occurring foster issues in the workplace setting as coworkers morale and productivity is likely to suffer (Foley & Powell, 1999, p. 1054). In other instances, morale of the WR participant can be impacted as they deal with the effects of gossip, and scrutiny throughout the workplace (Chory & Hoke, 2019, p. 586).

Breakups

Further research has found that WR's damage coworker relationships, involving awkwardness between coworkers surrounding breakups, as a coworker stated, "fighting between them lately has made everyone uncomfortable" (Chory & Hoke, 2019, pp. 585-586). Additionally, breakups are reported to have a harmful effect on the workplace setting, as one coworker explained, "both do not work well and ruin the whole workplace" (Chory & Hoke, 2019, p. 587). Through these examples, it is clear that failed WR's created an awkward or tense workplace, which can often result in participants distancing themselves or leaving the job to avoid that environment (Horan et al., 2019, p. 573-574). Similarly, coworkers identified scheduling issues as once a breakup occurs those individuals formally in a WR relationship, they no longer want to work the same days as each other (Chory & Hoke, 2019, p. 587). When it comes to managerial action and fairness, fairness is only affected when the result of a breakup produces negative emotions that end up impacting the workplace which was previously unaffected by the WR (Cole, 2009, p. 370). Horan et al., (2019) indicate that a breakup will likely cause a ripple effect throughout members of the organization as every individual will feel the effects of the failed workplace relationship (p. 569).

Gender

Despite the push for gender equality in the workplace, there are still stereotypical beliefs about what roles women and men should fulfill in society, this lack of equality tends to transition into different treatment for each gender regarding WR's (Ryan & Haslam, 2007, as cited in Chan-Serafin et al., 2017, p. 316). Pierce et al., (1996, as cited in Chan-Serafin, 2017) argues that research on WR have generally found that women in these relationships are penalized to a greater extent than men in a similar position (p. 316). Anderson and Fisher (1991, as cited in Chan-Serafin, 2017) argue that women are penalized more due to being viewed as more dispensable to the organization for occupying lower-level jobs (p. 316). Powell (2001, as cited in Chan-Serafin, 2017) explained how "female subordinates were perceived negatively as having a job motive when engaging in an HWR with a *married* male supervisor" (p. 316).

Conversely, Powell (1986) and Pierce (1998, as cited in Foley & Powell, 1999) found that women held more negative attitudes toward WR than men, and that women desired more managerial action to discourage WR's than men (p. 1050). Gender imbalances in the workplace; that is male executives, female assistants, results in the notion that sexual harassment may occur at a higher rate, thus clearly resulting in a negative impact for women involved (Houseman, 2019, as cited in Cavico & Mujtaba, 2021, p. 672). HWR can be more troublesome for women, especially in a male-dominant environment with pressure coming from the boss, it relates directly to power and results in further imbalances for women in avoiding unwanted sexual harassment in the workplace setting (Leong, 2019, as cited in Cavico & Mujtaba, 2021, p. 672). According to EEOC, Policy Statement (1990, as cited in Cavico & Mujtaba, 2021), it was included that managers in this situation "view women as 'sexual playthings', thereby creating an atmosphere that is demeaning to women" (p. 673). Moreover, according to Chory and Hoke (2019) female organizational members in their study were more likely to report a negative affect due to the WR, while male members were twice as likely to claim that a WR had no negative effects (p. 591).

Age

Chory and Hoke (2019) explore how the Millennial generation (born between 1981 and 1997), are more open to WR's, less likely to avoid a WR, and more likely to date a supervisor or coworker (Vault Careers, 2016; Workplace Options, 2012, as cited in Chory & Hoke, 2019, p. 575). Employees from previous generations are described as more likely to report no significant positive WR effects on the workplace setting as the Millennial generation (Workplace Options, 2012, as cited in Chory & Hoke, 2019, p. 576). Conversely, Cowan and Horan (2014, as cited in Chory & Hoke, 2019) "found that contemporary employees engage in WR strictly to "hook up" and because the work context creates the opportunity for interpersonal attraction" (p. 576). Overall, it seems that norms surrounding WR appear to be changing which may be due to younger employees engaging in WR in different ways than the previous generations (Chory & Hoke, 2019, p. 576).

However, it is noted that while Millennials may view WR quite positively, they may actually be harmed by it over time, as WR could result in guilt, embarrassment and even unprofessionalism which impacts the workplace setting as a whole (Chory & Hoke, 2019, p. 576).

Additionally, it is indicated that Millennial women are more aware with the negative implications of WR, as compared to Millennial men (Chory & Hoke, 2019, p. 591). The risks and rewards of WR's are still as tangible today for Millennials, just as they were in the past (Chory & Hoke, 2019, p. 595). Emphasis is placed on Millennials for being more skilled at preventing romantic aspects of their WR's from spilling over into the workplace environment, as it is explained that they may be better equipped than prior generations when it comes to managing WR's (Hughes et al., 2005, as cited in Chory & Hoke, 2019, p. 577).

Conflict Formed as a Result of WR's

Interpersonal conflict typically results when there is an attempt to change the behaviour or principles of those involved in an extramarital affair, thus leading to more dysfunction within the workplace environment (Yang & Mossholder, 2004, as cited in Alder & Quist, 2014, p. 338). Chan-Serafin (2017) indicates that those who engage in an HWR, end up with a negative impression on their career, as it creates conflict throughout the workplace with an individual's peers (p. 315). Further notions of conflict as a result of WR's can described by Mainiero (1989, as cited by Foley & Powell, 1999) as he explains that coworkers believe it "will lead to the sharing of confidential information during 'pillow talk'…thereby giving both participants an unfair advantage" thus coworkers perceive WR to be a conflict of interest for this reason (p. 1047). Conflict is at is lowest in a WR where the participants are at different organizational levels, but do not have a direct-reporting relationship, as this helps coworkers to not be so opposed because no unjust advantages could be handed out in this type of relationship (Foley & Powell, 1999, p. 1048). Another concern for coworkers is if an extramarital affair has occurred and they know the spouse of the one cheating, it puts them in a difficult spot, resulting in unwillingness to deceive the spouse, resentment, and ignoring of the accomplice (Mainiero, 1989; Quin, 1977, as cited in Foley & Powell, 1999, p. 1049). Moreover, conflict and disagreements between the WR partners' can consequently spill over from their personal lives to the workplace, thus creating issues throughout the setting as complaining about each other to coworkers begins to take form. (Chory & Hoke, 2019, p. 587).

Management Intervention

Due to workplace romances being inevitable, it puts management in a moral, ethical and legal dilemma, especially if it involves extramarital affairs or hierarchical relationships (Cole, 2009, p. 364). WR's have put managers into a complex position, as Riach and Wilson (2006, as cited in Balaban, 2019) explain how "a manager noted that romance can give the individual a motive for coming to work, but customers and other staff might see the romantic behaviour as negative; it could even attract the wrong employee" (p. 128). This dilemma is demonstrated by Hoffman, Clinebell, and Kilipatrick (1997, as cited in Balaban, 2019) as they discuss how if a supervisor intervenes immediately, the company could face the liability of a privacy lawsuit (p. 130). On the other hand, if a company ignores a WR that ends in a sexual harassment claim, it is of potential liability as well (Balaban, 2019, p. 130).

Greenberg (1996, as cited in Foley & Powell, 1999) suggest that coworkers who view managerial interventions in WR as lower in distributive or procedural justice experience more negative outcomes, such as decreased morale and productivity (p. 1051). Distributive and procedural justice is concerned with the fairness of the ends, and fairness of the means thus explaining that if managers fail to intervene when it is deemed necessary, it negatively affects the environment of the workplace by creating issues among coworkers due to dissatisfaction (Greenberg, 1987, as cited in Foley & Powell, 1999, p. 1051). For instance, Foley and Powell (1999) explain that when management takes no action, coworkers prefer disciplinary action as they believe the WR disrupts the functioning of the work group (p. 1051). Thus, implementation of some sort of policy may be needed in order to preserve fairness among the workplace setting (Cole, 2009, p. 371).

Policy

Cole (2009) notes that over 80 percent of participants in her study were unaware of any WR policy in their workplace, it was assumed that no such policy exists, however there is a possibility it was not communicated effectively (p. 371). Alder and Quist (2014) observe that if a company does not permit WR and one exists, then perceived injustice will be felt by coworkers, and they may be judgemental as the couple is breaking company policy (p. 341). However, Karl and Sutton (2000, as cited by Alder & Quist, 2014) emphasize the dangers of strict regulation around romance as this can result in a "decline in employee's perceptions of fairness. This effect holds even in cases where the romance is highly visible or resulted in decreased performance" (p. 343). Issues with regulating extramarital affairs come into question when dealing with policies around WR, strict protocols in this case could raise legal concerns, and discrimination, suggesting it is best to have fewer regulations in these circumstances, despite its potentially harmful impact on the workplace atmosphere (Alder & Quist, 2014, p. 344).

Furthermore, Cavico and Mujtaba (2021) discuss how requiring those entering a WR, must disclose the relationship to human resources and sign a contract stating the relationship is consensual; can be done for some companies as a way to avoid legal problems when it comes to the possibility of a sexual harassment claim (p. 675). As the employer being proactive and setting fair workplace romance policies, will create appropriate relationship standards and conduct for the couple and coworkers. Despite the importance of workplace romance policies, it was reported by Morgan (2010, as cited in Cavico & Mujtaba, 2021) that only 13 percent of 600 companies surveyed had a formal written policy about WR, though 14 percent stated to have an "unwritten" policy (p. 679). As the years go by, it appears than more companies are increasing with the notion of written policies, as Leong (2019, as cited in Cavico & Mujtaba, 2021) reported in 2013 that 36 percent of companies had a written policy and 6 percent had a verbal policy (p. 679). Further emphasis is placed on policies that prohibit HWR, as discussed previously, these relationships have the most negative impact on the workplace environment, thereby creating concerns among coworkers (Workable.com, 2020, as cited in Cavico & Mujtaba, 2021, p. 680). Subsequently, if employers choose to implement policies on WR, they must ensure that all employees are aware and that the policy is consistently and fairly enforced in order to avoid confusion and disputes that

coworkers were uninformed (Davidson & Forsythe, 2011, as cited in Cavico & Mujtaba, 2021, p. 680). Regardless, of the issues or possible benefits of WR, in recent years, employers have taken on a more neutral position, where dating among coworkers is allowed, yet HWR are "frowned upon" and may result in a transfer or reassignment for Cisco Systems (Shellenbarger, 2010, as cited in Cavico & Mujtaba, 2021, p. 682).

Conclusion

Workplace Romances will always be inevitable; however, it is still important to bring attention to how they may create issues among the workplace environment. Decline in productivity is a major concern for most companies, along with HWR which were described to be the most potential to cause disruptions in the workplace setting. There is a gender imbalance in terms of workplace romance, as women tend to be impacted more greatly by WR and HWR, perhaps this is due to the sexual double standard that is still present in the world. Younger individuals were reported to be more open, and more likely to engage in a WR. However, they tend to be unaware of the issues that may arise in the aftermath of a relationship, or how they are negatively perceived by coworkers in some instances. Issues of favouritism in HWR were noted to impact coworkers more negatively than a WR in general. Yet, breakups created tension and awkwardness amongst the workplace setting. Disputes over management intervention for WR is quite divided, as some research was concerned that no management interaction harms the work environment, due to coworkers concerns about unjust advantages. However, strict regulation can also result in decreased performances and perceptions of unfairness. Additionally, policies have the possibility to reduce the chances of a sexual harassment claim, although few companies have formal written policies. Overall, workplace romances are quite complex, as each situation is different, thus there is no real right answer for what to do in every situation. However, it is easy to perceive WR as more likely to create more negative issues in the workplace environment than positive outcomes.

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